Refugees' stories and stories about refugees: Crafting new narratives of the Danish welfare state (RESTORE) - **Trine Øland**

1 Background and objective

Refugees have gained attention in European welfare states, especially since the major refugee arrivals from Syria in 2014 and 2015. Although there are reports about local communities developing collective, pragmatic and inclusive approaches towards refugees (Whyte et al. 2019), xenophophia and racism are also reported (Padovan-Özdemir & Øland 2017, 2018), and compassion fatigue is conveyed internationally (Nguyen et al. 2018). One way or the other, the active lives and lived experiences of some groups within the everyday enactment of the Danish welfare state, seem to be left in the shadow. Hence, RESTORE wants to craft new narratives of the Danish welfare state at the intersection of refugees' own complex experiences and the multifaceted political and administrative accounts of specific municipalities. RESTORE's *overall objective* is to include refugees' seldomly heard life-stories and experiences of shifting welfare services in the study of the continuous creation of the narrative of the Danish welfare state. By documenting and analysing refugees' narratives in relation to the ways refugees are symbolized in the welfare state's education and integration provisions, RESTORE's main contribution is to identify the content, structure and symbolising force of refugees' stories and of the welfare state's stories about refugees. RESTORE will answer the question of how refugees' stories and stories about refugees intersect. Doing so it asks whether this intersection might be a point from which a new chapter of the Danish welfare state can be told. RESTORE thus understands refugees' arrivals to the Danish welfare state as an analytical prism that makes it possible to study social and cultural welfare state ramifications of and within a postmigrant society (Petersen & Schramm 2016). This includes critically asking how transnational movements and postcolonial dimensions are at play in the symbolic representations of refugees as (ir)regular inhabitants of postmigrant society (Lentin & Karakayali 2016, Römhild 2017).

2 Research questions

RESTORE's *main research questions are: How are refugees' stories told and performed in relation to political and administrative stories about refugees? And how do the intersection of these stories contribute to the crafting of new narratives of the Danish welfare state?* The main research questions are broken down into two sub-questions. Sub-project 1 (P1); **Refugee stories about war and welfare** asks: how do differing groups of refugees make meaning of their life before and after their flight and

how are Danish welfare system encounters integrated into these narratives? Sub-project 2 (P2); **Political stories about refugees and welfare** enquires: how do municipalities make political sense

of receiving refugees and what constitutes the integration, education and welfare state arrangements encountering refugees?

3 State of the art and RESTORE's contribution

RESTORE will contribute to new knowledge concerning: 1. *The politics of storytelling* and 2. *Nordic welfare state exceptionalism*. **Ad. 1)** There are few narratives by refugees in the Danish research context (Staunæs 1998; Horsdal 2001, 2012). Internationally there is a body of literature in the vein of Arendt's (1958) writings about the politics of storytelling between a struggle to individual existence and fulfilling obligations as a citizen and member of community, e.g. Jackson's (2013) emphasis on storytelling as a politics and an ethics pointing to how narrative reworkings of experience make people alter their relations and prospects. Some scholars point to the interface between narratives and collective experiences and memories of the nation and the shaping of history, including the representation of social life in the margins (Anderson 2006, Andrews 2007, Arendt 1958, 2017; Butler 2005, Bhabha 1990, Levy & Snaider 2006). Also, a body of literature in the tradition of Critical Race Theory advocates for storytelling as a way to counter racist experiences and expressions (Bell 1992, Crenshaw et al. 1995, Solórzano & Yosso 2002). **Ad. 2)** Research has shown that the image of 'the Nordic exception', i.e. the combination of universalism and generosity of welfare provision, is accompanied by master narratives of exceptional equality and homogeneity (Johansen 2013, 2017; Jöhncke 2011, Keskinen et al. 2019, Kuisma 2007, Larsen 2011, 2018; Larsen & Øland 2011, Olwig & Pærregaard 2011, Whyte 2015). Moreover, research has exposed that, even welfare workers with (inter-)cultural competence and the best intentions at times handles cultural difference in ways that trigger racist and colonial patterns of thought. This research point to the possibility of an imperial humanitarianism being replayed and entwined in an ontology of forgetting that at the same time subordinates the Other (Aman 2015, Gullestad 2006, Jensen et al. 2017, Keskinen 2016, Keskinen et al. 2009, Lentin 2014, Loftsdóttir & Jensen 2012, Pon 2009, Simonsen 2015, Øland 2012, 2019; Øland et al. 2019). RESTORE's contribution to the state of the art literature will be to rewrite the master narrative of the Danish welfare state within a postmigrant cultural and social research horizon by including life stories of refugees and other silenced stories alongside the more known master narrative.

4 Analytical approach and main concepts

RESTORE will use a narrative theoretical-analytical approach in order to develop new knowledge. A *narrative approach* assumes narratives as a fundamental feature of the way humans make sense

of time and experience in individual, social, and political life (Arendt 1958, Brøndum 2016, Horsdal 2012, Ricoeur 1984, Riessman 2017). Accordingly, RESTORE will address relations of

power, norms and meaning making as this will be reflected in asymmetries and questions of authorship, voice and silences in the narratives. This focus can reflect which groups in society hold the right to speak, and which groups on the other hand are more often left to the representation of others. This perspective is closely connected to individual and collective processes of memory; remembering and forgetting, and not least to the silencing of 'alternative' stories (Ricoeur 2004; Ochs & Capps 1996; Corvellec 2015; Connerton 2008; Eastmond 2012, 2016). From this approach a range of central concepts will be translated to empirical analysis and shape and connect the analytical work of the two sub-projects. First, *temporality* is central and refers to narrators depicting temporal shifts and transitions by use of chronology, emplotment and disruptions. Second, an interest in the stories' *point of view* can give insight in how narrations and narrators stand in relation to given norms or communities in society by, e.g., deconstructing ideological assumptions underlying the narratives (Ricoeur 2004, Riessman 2017, Brøndum 2016). Thus, narratives are mediations of relations and events in past, present and future from a specific time and point of view. Third, we stress a focus on *the politics of remembering and forgetting* in our quest to understand the mediated connections (Jackson 2013, Warring 2011), weaving individual and collective memories together, signaling that remembrance is a form of forgetting (Connerton 2008, Ricoeur 2004).

5 *Methodology of the sub-projects and the synthesising analysis*

RESTORE uses *story-telling* as a common methodology in order to include experiences which are often silenced and excluded from the dominating master narratives (Solórzano & Yosso 2002).

P1: Refugee stories about war and welfare (Brøndum, post.doc.) uses narrative interviewing and narrative analysis. The analysis will be based on 25-30 biographic interviews with youngsters and adults who have fled their home countries. The interview persons will be found through engagement with different local refugee groups and in cooperation with *Venligboerne* and *Dansk Flygtningehjælp*. The body of interviewees will be composed by addressing three national groups; namely Somalis who fled to Denmark in the 1990s, Afghanis who mainly arrived in the 2000s and Syrian refugees who entered Denmark in the 2010s. With these groups and historical periods as selection criteria, the sub-project aims to explore experiences across both age and gender, as well as time and location in Denmark. The interviews will be structured by explorative questions making room for the refugees' own reflections and storytelling. The stories told are expected to vary according to factors connected to prior home, family story, and current situation in Denmark. At the same time, the sub-project seeks to identify common stories, structures and performances of the collective refugee and post-refugee condition relating to for instance homeland nostalgia and silence (Sa'di & Abu-Lughod 2007, Eastmond 2007), as well as the experience of being cast as a refugee in

the Danish integration and educational system in shifting policy environments. The study will address

the severe scientific challenges of ethics, power and language by collaborating with an interpreter, if necessary, but also by keeping vigilant of the differing contexts in relation to silences and voids in the stories told, including in relation to the known effects experiences of violence and displacement can have on peoples' story-telling (Eastmond 2007, Malkki 1995).

P2: Political stories about refugees and welfare (Øland) uses document material, narrative interviewing, and narrative analysis. Two municipalities which vary in terms of political history, welfare policies and educational approaches to refugees are selected for empirical study (cf. Esping-Andersen 1990, Keskinen 2016), e.g.: *Varde* is a liberal municipality which recently implemented a medical health screening program in their policy focusing on work or education for all newcomers; and *Roskilde* is a social democratic municipality that uses reception classes and has a history of applying general education. The municipalities are investigated as organizations (Corvellec 2015, Czarniawska 2004). The focus is on the narratives that analytically can be composed from the policies and stories told about refugees and welfare by significant municipal civil servants (Atwood & Lopez 2014, Ikemoto 1997, Love 2004, Solórzano & Yosso 2002). The data collection will cover the period 1990s–2010s which is the period when welfare turned into "workfare" (Wacquant 2009). 10-15 interviews in each municipality are carried out with civil servants in the different municipal spheres of responsibilty, such as consultants, politicians and leading welfare workers within integration, health, education and employment. In sum, this sub-project will tell the complex stories not readily told about reforms and change in the identity of each municipality. It will include the role refugees play in this regard and the shared collective meaning across the municipal settings (Stovel & Koski-Karell 2015). A student research assistant will assist collecting and analysing the data.

The main research question will be answered by a synthesising analysis of the analyses carried out in P1 and P2. RESTORE will contribute to the crafting of new narratives of the Danish welfare state by turning all data of the two sub-projects upon itself, analysing crossing temporal shifts and transitions, points of view and ideological transports, and remembrance and forgetting in therelational interstices of data. Based on the empirical analyses, RESTORE will abstract new theoretical understandings of the mediated connections between types of subject-based experiences from a marginalised group in society, and types of institutional welfare state-based narratives. It will moreover abstract how they intersect and create multiple meaning in terms of new narratives of the Danish welfare state in a global postmigrant, postcolonial and transnational condition.

6 *Project organization and internationalisation*

RESTORE will run for 3 years starting Spring 2021. The **research team** involves educational researcher and sociologist of religions Tine Brøndum, who recently (2017) finished her PhD, and

eductional researcher Trine Øland, who just (2018) finished a DFF-finansed research project on

welfare work with immigrants and refugees. Øland, who has management experience, heads RESTORE. P2 will commence one year ahead of P1 and will thus serve as a productive background for P1, and in the parrallel research process, each sub-project will serve as context to the other. RESTORE will involve a **reference group** through workshops in Copenhagen and online guidance. The reference group consists of the following prominent researchers who have accepted to participate in RESTORE: Professor *David Gillborn*, University of Birmingham; Professor *Lene Myong*, University of Stavanger; Professor *Marita Eastmond*, University of Gothenburg; Professor *Suvi Keskinen*, University of Helsinki; Associate Professor *Simon Turner*, UCHP and Accociate Professor *Moritz Schramm,* University of Southern Denmark. Finally, in order to strengthen RESTORE's international scope and impact, we will engage in 3-6 months research stays at respectively Columbia University, Teachers College, New York (Brøndum, P1), and Department of Gender and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Sydney (Øland, P2).

RESTORE's timetable and dissemination plan is as follows:

Time	Main activities (budgeted)	Milestones, incl. dissemination plan
Spring 2021	Data collection P2	
Fall 2021	Data collection and analyses P2; Reference group workshop	Preliminary analyses P2
Spring 2022	Data collection and analysis (P1, P2)	Outline of analytical options and publications within and across subprojects
Fall 2022	Data collection P1; Analyses of data & Writing (P1, P2)	Descriptive analyses conducted; Two journal articles submitted
Spring 2023	Writing (P1, P2); Reference group workshop; Research stays	Two journal articles submitted; Two newspaper chronicles
Fall 2023	Analyzing and Writing Closing public seminar	One article and drafting of a joint educational textbook as preparation for a spin off project

7 *Research communication and impact*

The results of RESTORE will in total be disseminated in 5 international journals such as the highly profiled periodicals *Memory Studies; Journal of Refugee Studies; Race, Ethnicity & Education; European Societies;* and *Nordic Journal of Migration;* and 1 textbook titled *(Dis)comforting welfare* to be used at University Colleges. Finally, we will engage in dialogue with peers at international scientific conferences. At the *Memory Studies Association's Annual Conference* we will organise a symposium to be used as a stepping stone for a special issue of *Memory Studies*. Finally, we will

communicate the research through newspaper chronicles, and a public seminar.

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